DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 421 752 EA 029 142

AUTHOR - Benson, Dawn
TITLE Ambushed by the Principal: Parents and School Councils.
PUB DATE 1998-04-00
NOTE 27p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (San Diego, CA, April 13-17, 1998).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research (143) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Educational Administration; Elementary Secondary Education; Foreign Countries; *Parent Attitudes; *Parent Participation; Parent School Relationship; *Personal Narratives; *Principals; School Administration
IDENTIFIERS Canada

ABSTRACT

The experiences of British Columbia and Ontario elementary and secondary school parents with their school and parent advisory councils are described in this paper. The study relies on narrative research, and many of the stories focus on interactions between parents and the principal. The study describes different visions of reality by sharing the voices of administrators as well as the voices of parents. The parents that were interviewed described "stage managed" council meetings with the principal clearly controlling the agenda. Parents felt the were silenced or were only allowed to talk about inconsequential topics. Their voices in the narratives come across as strident and often angry and frustrated. Each of the narratives of the six parents is followed by a response from several school principals who were described by their parent councils as collaborative and facilitative. These principals, who represent numerous school settings, reflect on the frustrations described by the parents and offer suggestions for parents or school principals to consider. The study concludes that principals need practical models on how to share power. (Contains 32 references.) (RJM)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED 421 752

Ambushed By The Principal: Parents and School Councils

Dawn Benson

Faculty of Education
Simon Fraser University
Burnaby, B. C. Canada V5A 1S6

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☑ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE AND DISSEMINATE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

D. Benson

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

Presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association,
San Diego, 1998

EA 029 142

Introduction

> **"I've seen this happen for many years now, both at the elementary school where my kids attended, and now at the high school. The first parent council meeting of the school year is well attended. Usually there are a fairly high number of dads in attendance too. Most people say nothing, just observe. Occasionally someone will ask, tentatively, about a 'serious' issue like the process of teacher evaluation, or about curriculum. The principal will signal either subtly or with some degree of frostiness that 'this is not what we're really here for'. There is little discussion on this, some glances are exchanged, but at the next month's meeting there are less than half as many parents attending. The usual crowd of 'school boosters' remains firmly in place - all is well with the world - and an opportunity is lost."** (parent advisory council member, father of two secondary school students)

School principals everywhere find themselves performing a difficult balancing act. At the same time as resources are diminishing there is a growing call from society for their schools to demonstrate greater effectiveness, higher standards and a reduction in the student drop-out rate. Increased directives from school board and ministry bureaucracies abound (Lewington & Orpwood, 1995) . And at the very same time as they are feeling pressured to increase efficiency, principals now find themselves expected to collaborate or share decision-making with school or parent advisory councils, a much slower process. And like the parent whose voice we just heard, many parents are expecting school councils to deal with more substantive issues than bake sales and hot dogs.

At the current time of economic uncertainty and higher unemployment, parents seek security for the future of their children by encouraging and being involved in their educational development (Guppy & Davies, 1997). Schools are being blamed for many of the ills of society from economic stagnation to high levels of youth crime and drug use (p. 2). More parents are worried and not only want to be involved in many more school issues but they expect this involvement to be meaningful. There appears to be broad agreement about the necessity of parent participation in the process of establishing quality schooling (Angus, 1993). The disagreements occur over the appropriate nature and form of this participation.

The research that informed this paper was focused on the experiences that parents were having with their school and parent advisory councils. Rather than "the

council" being the focus of the parent narratives as originally proposed, quite often the story told was of the relationship between the parents and their school principal. "Ambushed" and "highjacked" are emotionally charged words. Those were the words that some parents used to describe their experiences.

The parent voices in these narratives are sometimes strident and often angry and frustrated. They speak from their position or their perception, "outside" the education system. I write from" inside" the system, from a mid-size British Columbia school district in rural B.C. in western Canada. Currently a senior administrator working at central office, my days are spent with administrators and other educators, responding to the demands of those within the system, and to the general public.

Six local elementary principals have joined me in the writing of this paper. Their schools range in size from less than two hundred to around four hundred students. They have offered to read the narratives of the "ambushed" parents and respond to them from their own experiences of working with parents and Parent Advisory Councils, the legislated role for parents in British Columbia, Canada.

Administration: Insight into Life

Greenfield (1993), suggests that educational administrative training should be "training for life and only those who have some insight into life - its ironies, joys and tragedies - are fit to be administrators" (p. 112). He suggests that administrators must be able to see life in more complex, ambiguous and humane terms. He urges the use of the social sciences to be used by administrators as windows of discovery and thereby to provide them alternative perceptions and values. "I would also hope that inquiries into social reality would make plain the contestation, the different visions of reality that people have, of how one prevails over another, of how power is used to sustain and propel certain views over others, and to ask what the consequences are" (p. 252).

This paper attempts to address the "different visions of reality" by sharing the voices of administrators as well as the voices of parents. And certainly part of this reality concerns the use of "power" in education. Who has it, and who doesn't? Whose voice is listened to? How does one voice prevail over another? All people who live and work with others are faced with such

issues of power. Current directions involve the empowerment of other groups within the educational system. These actions intend to change the ways in which schools traditionally operate (Golanda, 1990). Empowerment proposals include an enhanced role for teachers and parents. This paper speaks to some of the consequences.

The paradoxical advantage for the administrator of giving up or sharing power is that ultimately he or she may gain more support and strength. Sharing power is not necessarily like dividing up a pie. Sharing decisions and responsibilities with others will not diminish the ability to accomplish the educational task at hand. Principals who power-share have learned that more power for some does not mean less for others (Nathan, 1991).

Schools are different places these days. Conventional wisdom led schools to form the established patterns of power, governance and responsibility, through a premise of specialization recognizing the educators as "the experts". The traditional training of school administrators prepared school principals to manage their schools this top-down manner (Hoyle, 1994). These days the move is from top-down decision making towards increased collaboration, shared problem-solving and democratic procedures. This movement requires a different kind of leader. One who uses facilitative and enabling and empowering processes to help others succeed with them, rather than simply trying to succeed alone. "Sharing power" is an expectation or new norm for the school principal of today.

Why Parent Involvement and School Councils?

That parental involvement in the schooling process has positive consequences has been well documented (Epstein 1991; Henderson, 1987, 1988; Greenwood & Hickman, 1991). Henderson (1987), states that the evidence is now beyond dispute: parent involvement improves student achievement. She shows that when parents are involved children do better in school and, she reports, they go to better schools.

Parents have been involved in the local school for over a hundred years. They have served as school trustees, as parent volunteers, or as members of the local Home and School Association. The current education restructuring debate includes a focus on more decentralization of decision making and as

one format to facilitate this, the establishment of formal school councils. "In theory these school councils would substantially increase the ability of parents and school personnel to influence educational policies and make schools more responsive to the demands of their environment" (Rideout, 1995, p. 12).

This paper takes the theories and policies regarding school and parent councils and describes how parents have experienced it played out in action. The narratives shared in this paper are all from Canadian parents who reside in the provinces of Ontario and British Columbia. The responsibility for education is a provincial responsibility in Canada and although Quebec has had mandated parental involvement in schools for over fifteen years, the other provinces have taken a softer approach towards parent involvement and are only now beginning to mandate and implement the involvement of parents through formal school councils (Renihan & Renihan, 1994). This move began in the early 1990's and now most provinces have school council legislation either drafted or in place (Collins, 1996).

In British Columbia the councils are " Parent Advisory Councils" and generally consist of parents only who meet on a regular basis and tend to serve as a booster club or in a support role for the school. In Ontario the legislation around the establishment of school councils calls for a more formal structure where elected parents and educators (the school principal and teachers) as well as other community members and in some cases students, may serve on the school council. The role and authority of the Ontario school councils is still being formulated but the provincial Ontario Parent Council is calling for some "shared" decision-making authority and responsibilities for the school councils.

Tensions Between Forces: Stability Or Change?

> **"Despite the acquisition of formal legal status to participate in educational decision making, parents in reality have no greater voice than they formerly had" (Martin, 1993, p. 121).**

Yvonne Martin (1993) suggests that legislation is usually thought of as a means for implementing public policy, which is supposed to express the will of the people. However she insists "what appears to be true and what

actually happens are not necessarily the same things" (p. 121). This discrepancy that she describes between the apparent and the real is not necessarily a result of conscious deliberate action on the part of those establishing public policy but is more a result of the tension existing between the forces for stability and the forces for destabilization or change.

Martin refers to the 1988 Sullivan Royal Commission on Education in British Columbia, Canada, which heard a strong call from parents demanding more participation in educational decision making. She states that it is likely the education system has perceived this as a possible source of destabilization through the realization that "greater participation by parents will dismantle traditional power relationships in the education system" (p. 123).

The development of such policy at the highest level of decision making and the actual implementation of this policy which occurs "at the street level" is often contingent on the discretion of the educators (usually the school principals), who become the deliverers of the policy (Weatherley & Lipsky, 1977). "The relationship between the development and implementation of policy is of necessity problematic since, in a sense, the meaning of policy cannot be known until it is worked out in practice at the street level" (p. 173).

Although the rhetoric from various Canadian ministries of education describes parents as "partners" with the school system, parents interviewed for this research describe a reality which for them seems to consist of more barriers than open doors. The most frequently cited barrier from another recent study was that many principals rejected, avoided or simply did not encourage parental involvement (Ontario Parent Council, 1994). Parents in that study also said that parent advice might be sought by the principal, but then not acted on. There are many other phenomenological and logistical barriers which occur on the part of administrators and teachers (Fullan 1982). Phenomenological barriers involve educators' lack of knowledge and understanding of the subjective world of parents. Logistical barriers involve the competing demands for their time that educators face, as well as their lack of training in dealing with parents.

In her research of school councils in Newfoundland, Collins' (1995) describes an expanding involvement of parents, from providing help in classrooms to sitting on policy and curriculum committees. She agrees that " the general agreement on the importance of involving parents in the educational process tends to break down at the point of implementation" (p. 6). Principals and teachers seem to favour increased parental involvement in traditional ways while many parents feel that all roles are equal in importance. Parents in the study pinpointed "active support from the administration as paramount" (p.34).

A study of Chicago principals, done before the more recent decentralization reforms, described the process that they used to "buffer" their schools from the external environment (Smylie, Crowson, Chou & Levin, 1994). Principals actively sought to "harness" the unpredictability of the surrounding community and as a result of this, "parent involvement was generally not allowed beyond established buffers" (p.343). Principals were described as sometimes using the subtle art of persuasion and manipulation, or of using more blatant methods to "keep school councils off their back", such as by ensuring the council activities were trivial, by turning the councils into a rubber-stamp group, or by moulding the group into a propagandizer to support various school issues.

Since the reforms, some Chicago principals have continued to attempt to harness their councils. Some handpick their council members and control the policy-decision agendas that come to their councils. Some still attempt to maintain the old barriers since they fear the council intrusion into the "real work" of the school. Principals struggle with the pressure to negotiate cooperation and shared decision-making not only with their parent councils but also with their school staffs while at the same time they personally are held responsible for bearing "the risk of things gone wrong anywhere in the school organization" (p. 349).

Interacting with and satisfying the varying and different demands of diverse and numerous stakeholder groups with different interests and goals is part of the increased challenges and requirements of the daily work-life of an administrator today. Principals who are unable or unwilling to buy into these

school reform initiatives have been found to be at risk when it is time for their contract to be renewed (Flinspach & Ryan, 1994).

Methodology: The Personal Voice of Narrative Inquiry

The research which provided the basis for this paper was a narrative inquiry focused on recording and emphasizing the personal knowledge of the parents regarding the school system and their experience with Parent Councils and school administrators. The initial research followed the course of one entire school year, while follow-up data was also collected over the next year and a half.

Although the study began with the collection of narratives from seven parents within one school district, the geographic range of the study widened as an on-line dialogue began with fifteen parents from other jurisdictions . Most of these parents belonged to either a British Columbia based Parent Network list-serve (TPON) or to a cross-Canada education reform bulletin board, EDUCAN, which originates at Humber College in Ontario.

Parents joined the study on-line after a brief description of the research was posted on the TPON list-serve with an invitation for interested parents to contact the researcher. Parents who joined the study on-line were sent a copy of the research proposal and signed an ethics form which indicated that as well as on-line dialogue they might be requested to take part in a face-to-face interview. Approximately half of the on-line parents were interviewed personally. Copies of agenda and minutes of school council meetings were gathered from several of the on-line parent narrators in order to provide a broader context to their personal experiences.

The same questions were asked of both the local and the "on-line" parents. Were they involved in their school or parent councils? What had their experiences been like?

Although the research had begun with a focus on the parents and their school councils, as the data were reviewed it became evident that in many cases the story of the school council was also the story of the relationship between the council and the school administrator. This paper reflects the voices of parents

who felt hijacked or ambushed by their school administrators. The design of the inquiry became fully articulated through the salient issues which emerged as the study progressed (Lincoln, 1990).

Several of the narratives or parent voices included have been reported in two other papers also presented at the 1998 AERA session. This paper takes these parent experiences and seeks to add depth to what they have shared through the additional voices of school principals from the local school district initially studied. Through these "different visions of reality" it is hoped that a broader understanding is reached. These local principals who responded to the "ambushed parents'" were described by their own parent council members as inclusive, responsive and collaborative. Their councils were described as being in a good relationship with their administrator.

Each of the parent narratives shared in this paper will be followed by a cluster of reflections from the various principals who responded.

The Parents Speak and the Principals Respond

In chaos and powerless

Sheila has two children in the elementary grades. She was the secretary of her newly formed school council, the "Council from Hell" as she described it, before it was disbanded by the school board due to all the conflict. She was very discouraged when she wrote on-line:

> **"I was feeling more positive until I started corresponding with other parents on school councils and found that I seemed to be the only person on a 'Council From Hell' and we can't seem to get ourselves out from under this reputation. The opportunity to network with other councils over the past year has taught me that there are many 'councils from hell' out there, but for one reason or another they're working in isolation. That too is another roadblock.**
>
> **Our council got off to a bad start, with people who were inexperienced, misinformed, and who were being guided by a principal who seemed sure that this school council thing would just be another 'edu-fad' and disappear. Not a hands-on kind of guy. He attended meetings just long enough to stir up issues and then leave, letting the parents fight, and argue among themselves.**

This principal has transferred to another school in our area. In speaking to the chair of his current council it would seem that he is setting the same pattern with his current council as he did with ours. It's like he's setting them up to fail! I found out later on that he was reporting to the board that we weren't capable of making decisions because we couldn't even get along in our council meetings.

The dynamics of the group were such that too many people wanted to be in charge, but no one wanted to lead (if that makes sense). I don't know what it is about the position of 'chairperson' that implies 'power', but that too has presented us with problems. Interpersonal problems escalated to such a level that at one point police were involved. (I should mention at this point that I was the secretary. I spent most meetings playing peacemaker, got tired of it and finally resigned.) The group was left to flounder and eventually lost all of our parent volunteers because no one wanted to work with the council.

From that point on I've been on a quest to learn as much as possible about school councils so that I could start this year working toward more effective ends.

I've been told that the principal is supposed to be like an executive secretary bringing recommendations and information to and from council (similar to the senior administrators working with the elected school board).

That's how it's supposed to work ideally, but as I found out this weekend at a conference (where by the way many school council parents were in attendance) what seems to be happening in MOST cases is a council dominated by the principal." (Sheila)

The Principals Respond to Sheila:

• ***Right away, when I read this I thought, "Here is a principal who is afraid of a parent council that works". Maybe Sheila is right and he's keeping them in chaos to keep them powerless. It reminded me of a parent who (metaphorically speaking) keeps an adolescent locked in the cellar to keep them protected from the evils of the world. Far better to guide them and strengthen them in order to make them effective in dealing with the world.***

• ***A school council needs some guidance from the Board of School Trustees, similar to what we have in our district. Our councils are recognized by the board when they submit their constitution and bylaws for acceptance. This***

gives the group a clear starting point and a set of guidelines to fall back on. The role of the principal is a difficult one. But bearing in mind that the whole purpose of the council is to advise, it makes no sense for the principal to try to lead the people who advise him.

• Perhaps this principal does think this is a fad that will go away. Seems as if he doesn't see any relationship between his vision for the school and the vision of the parents. It will not work for Sheila unless she can get the administrator "on board" with the council . Some kind of work on a philosophy and mission statement for this school is needed as the council begins. From that will flow a structure, a blue-print of working together.

• Sheila seems to be doing some good legwork and getting information and talking with others to get help. She sounds angry and frustrated, and with good reason. School principals need to realize that parent involvement is not a fad! They need to stay involved with their school council progress, must provide information as required and should work to mediate with parents if asked or if this seems necessary. Principals need to let parents see how "due process" works and how results can be achieved in an orderly way.

• Sounds as if Sheila needs to find someone to temporarily take the lead with this council to get it up and running. Is there a District Parent Council person who could do it? The principal may need some help in understanding that parent involvement and parent councils are here to stay - and it isn't a bad thing!

"This is an excellent school and all of our teachers are excellent".

Andrew has two students in secondary school. He has been a very active "involved" parent. Initial involvement consisted of serving hot dogs and helping with various classroom activities as a parent volunteer. More recently he has been a part of school and district parent councils and education committees. His comments on Parent Advisory Council Meetings were as follows:

"Principals usually stage-manage the council meetings. Controlling the information, the tone, carefully keeping a lid on things. It's like having your parents in your room when you're a teenage boy and your friends are over and you want to talk about girls. The principal's comments tend to follow the same restrictive patterns: 'You can't talk about that,' or as a quick excuse, 'It's a district policy'. Parents who won't accept these excuses are told 'That's an excellent point. I'll look into that and let you know.' But that's the end of it.

And if questioned about staff or personnel practices principals often respond 'This is an excellent school. All our teachers are excellent'. If a parent actually dares criticize, they're told 'Your comments are libelous and actionable by law.' (Andrew)

The Principals Respond to Andrew:

• Andrew sounds discouraged, frustrated and disheartened. His tone is that of someone who has tried and given up. He has reached the point where he doesn't feel there is anything that can be done in a system that is so clearly controlled and so strongly resistant to change. It could be that his principal is feeling that he too has no real input with many decisions. He can't control who is on his staff, and perhaps feels he has no influence on district policy.

• It seems that Andrew wants to talk about personnel issues though, and PAC meetings aren't the place to do this. The principal needs to provide parents with a way of voicing their concerns to ensure that such issues don't keep coming up at parent meetings. Parents expressing any kind of personnel concerns should be met with privately.

• The principal needs to set up some kind of forum for discussion around any "district policy" in question. Someone from district staff could be invited as a guest speaker to explain the rationale and history of the policy. Parents could be asked for input and feedback regarding board policy. And they need to be listened to.

• Guidelines as to what is appropriate to discuss at a parent meeting need to be reviewed by the principal and parent council executive at the beginning of the school year. A different forum needs to be set up to deal with touchy

personnel and personal issues. The bottom line is the principal needs to deal with these issues.

- ***The principal needs to see the parent council as a group that could give some increased influence. The voice of a strong parent group is a powerful influence at the school board level.***

- ***The administrator needs to meet one on one with Andrew to discuss any concerns regarding a specific teacher, not try to intimidate him with legal threats!***

The value of a parent's support

Stephanie has two children in secondary school and one still in elementary. She teaches at a post-secondary institution in British Columbia and being an educator herself, she often stresses the importance of a good education to her children. She was interviewed about her experiences with parent councils and she began by stating that she would never return to PAC because she had been "ambushed" by the principal. When asked to explain she stated:

> **" I had a child in grade two who was not doing very well in school and I thought if I sat on the Parent Advisory Council (PAC) I could somehow influence the educative process so that in some way it would help my son. So I became the class representative for the grade 2 class. After my experiences that year with PAC I quit and refused to ever sit on a parent council again.**
>
> **I found that any issue that I was interested in presenting or discussing at my PAC was thwarted by the principal who was very demeaning, sexist and clearly organized the parent council meetings in order to promote whatever propaganda he was promoting at the time. The Parent Advisory Council was the principal's vehicle for this. By sexist I mean the principal preferred talking to the fathers about important issues.**
>
> **At PAC I found that any issues I might have discussed were silenced either by the chair or the principal and certainly never discussed by other parents. If other parents were interested in other topics they never had the nerve to speak up. The principal was very dominant.**
>
> **I had some real concerns about my son's classroom. We were already upset with the system because our son managed to get through grade 1 without being able to read. That was allowed to happen and almost was**

encouraged. All through his schooling I kept telling them something was wrong, they kept telling me how they had kids who were way worse than my son. Whoever we talked to about that just told us it was fine, it was okay, it was normal. We knew it wasn't.

But these were all things we were never ever allowed to talk about. Hot dogs. That's what we talked about." (Stephanie)

The Principals Respond to Stephanie:

• At face value, it seems Stephanie has some legitimate concerns. Rather than PAC, a more appropriate vehicle for her might be the school-based team meeting. She seems concerned that the school's expectations are not high enough. They may not be. She may need to get help on that issue from other experienced teachers or from a district officer. If she feels the principal is being sexist and demeaning she needs to compare notes with other parents and the council executive and if this is the case then appropriate action should be taken.

• Stephanie's vision of the parent group may be unrealistic. She may not have found that the rest of the parent group had the same concerns as her. If that was the case, then she was in the wrong place to deal with them. I think Stephanie should have gone to central office to get help for her son regarding the reading issue, and not tried to do it by volunteering for a parent council for what seems to be the wrong reasons.

• Was Stephanie feeling silenced because she was a woman, because she was appearing to be too aggressive, or because the principal and the parent 'chair' did not think that other parents shared her concern? Whatever the reason, she needs to have her child's problems addressed.

• There is clearly a personality clash between the administrator and Stephanie that needs to be worked through. If the administrator "is" dominant and sexist then that attitude and management style must change before it is likely that meaningful input from the parent council will happen. The administrator must ensure that everyone's views and issues are addressed.

• *I wonder if there is a procedure in place where Stephanie could circumvent the "chair" and "challenge the agenda"? I believe that there may be something in the Parent Advisory Council constitution and by-laws which allows her to do that. However the group would have to vote to agree to this and she might have to "stack the meeting" to ensure that her topic got discussed.*

• *We do know that a kid's progress in school is directly affected by the involvement of the parent with the school. This is because that involvement of the parents adds value in the child's eyes to the whole business of school. The value of a parent's support is key. Therefore parents need to find ways to be involved at school in a positive role and then trust builds. When this happens the guards go down and new topics and concerns can be broached. It's simple, but it's not quick!*

• *In my experience as a principal, I have found that every issue and concern must have an appropriate venue to deal with it and it "should" be dealt with. Otherwise it will come back to haunt the principal one way or another!*

• *I think I met this principal!*

Power: Should it be shared? How should it be shared?

Boyd's only daughter is now attending university. During her secondary school years he was an active B.C. parent who often attended parent advisory council meetings. He was interested in contributing to my collecting of parent council data by writing on-line. He wrote about his several years of involvement with parent councils:

> **"Most of the meetings I attended reviewed material which could as easily and much more effectively been presented in written form without a meeting. The principal in general saw the meeting as a way to communicate with parents 'after' the fact regarding decisions that had already been made. Remember that in order for a decision to be rationally made, there must be preparation. A committee or something does some groundwork, makes recommendations to the committee of the whole, which then says yea or nay. If you have no committee structure, all you get is 'super-chairs'--an activist parent or two who does everything. . . and nothing.**

The only decisions I remember having been made at the parent council meetings were decisions to communicate. For example, 'we will send a letter to the Ministry' ". (Boyd)

The Principals Respond to Boyd:

• ***This seems to be about power. Who has it and who doesn't. This particular parent does not feel empowered at all. Sounds as if his parent advisory council needs to be making some decisions that count, and needs to be seen to do so also.***

• ***Perhaps this person sees the parent council as a means to run the school without having to get any degrees or qualifications. If, however, other parents share this view, then they should look into the mandate of their parent council.***

• ***Boyd seems to take a business view of things and sounds frustrated by the structure of his council. The loose structure of the parent council doesn't seem to be effective.***

• ***It appears that "process" is missing from the parent council decision-making. It may be that the administrator is trying to expedite the parent council agenda or business at the cost of "democracy". The agendas and minutes of council meetings should show how "new business" and "old business" items are handled. The principal and the chair of the council should be trying to draw in as many people as possible to the decision-making process. The power to make changes cannot stay totally with the parents either and so the ideas of the committee would have to be blended with those of the other stakeholders so that all would have some ownership to make the changes work.***

Hot Dogs As Curriculum?

Lynn has three children in school. Two of her children are of secondary school age while the youngest is still in elementary school. Lynn's voice comes from Ontario, a province where formal school councils are being newly implemented. She writes on-line:

"We have had only one meeting. Since we had not elected a Chairperson yet, our Principal took it upon himself to set up the first agenda. Before the meeting adjourned, a few of the parents mentioned that we would like to discuss curriculum. It was agreed that it would be on the agenda for the next meeting.

When we received our copy of the minutes of the last meeting and the agenda for the next meeting, curriculum was blatantly missing from the agenda. I made a visit to the school today to talk with our Principal and ask if this was intentional or a mistake. I was told that he had the secretary type everything that was in his notes and he doesn't think that curriculum was there, but he did remember it was mentioned. He then proceeded to tell me that Hot Dogs (which had been discussed) are also curriculum. I questioned this, and was told that 'curriculum is everything that affects a child's learning at school. It is a very big topic.' " (Lynn)

The Principals Respond to Lynn:

• *There is an obvious confusion for the principal about the role of the council. The principal should not have control over the agenda or the minutes. The parents need to take on that role.*

• *For this parent there seems to be an issue of "improvement". Lynn wants to see changes it seems and yet it won't even involve her own children, as they are not in that age group. I wonder if she has left this topic until now because she was afraid her possible criticism would endanger her children?*

• *It appears that subconsciously or otherwise, the principal doesn't want to talk about curriculum. He seems to want the parent council to be a funding group, i.e., the Hot Dog Committee, or a support group for his own ideas. To avoid the council being hijacked, the next agenda should be reviewed prior to the meeting by several council members who were present at the last meeting.*

• *Parents should be responsible for making up the agenda at a parent meeting. It should be a collaborative effort including the principal feeling that he or she can add things to the agenda also. Curriculum is certainly fair game for a discussion at a parent council. It might be worthwhile to provide some basic information or include a guest speaker but then there should be a question and discussion period and if there are lots of concerns a committee*

should be established to work with the staff regarding these parent concerns. Everybody needs an "Allison" like ours, on their parent council. She's a very involved mom who is so knowledgeable and credible with the parents and community. Her wonderful way with words accomplishes much for our school council parents.

- ***It is likely the administrator is evading the issue around curriculum for some reason. Perhaps the principal doesn't feel that parents need input on this issue, or it may be felt to be a"staff issue", or it could be that they feel discussion with parents will add to the workload involving additional research, information , etc. Whatever the reason the parents need to review the agenda before each council meeting.***

- ***The parents need to be surveyed in order to find out if their concerns are general concerns about education or specific concerns about curriculum and methodology.***

Honest help or a threat?

Malkin has two children who are both in secondary school in Ontario. She began her life as an involved parent when her children were just beginning school more than a decade ago. Her background included teacher education and so she was interested in the education of her own children from both a personal and a professional viewpoint. She was part of a large group of parents who wanted to be active in their children's elementary school. She writes about that experience:

> **"At the beginning, when our Curriculum Committee was formed, we were all there because we hoped to be able to find ways to contribute to the children's successful learning. We were looking to the principal for guidance as to how best we could do this. The new principal presented herself as very receptive to our activities. In retrospect, perhaps she was trying out different ways to contain the potential threat. At first she seemed very positive, but gradually became very controlling. I can only surmise that she felt threatened by a group of parents who were interested in 'quality education'.**

I'm not sure our Curriculum committee was ever stopped in our tracks from doing a specific project, but our requests were never honoured, help was never given, promises were made and then not kept. Our prompts got us nowhere. Gradually we stopped proposing projects such as bringing in speakers; we knew there was no point. I suppose it became like self-censorship." (Malkin)

The Principals Respond to Malkin:

• An opportunity lost. If I was not aware that this was the perception of "me" as a principal, I would pray for one straight-shootin' but kind parent to sit down for a one-on-one- chat with me and say "Did you know that this is the perception about you? "

• However, there are two sides to every story. Perhaps the principal got burned and so is gun shy of close parent involvement. Maybe she is distracted or out of touch with the way things should be. If she did quench the light, she needs to make an apology and get back at it. We need reflective and approachable practitioners.

• Sounds as if Malkin felt she "could" effect some real change, and now feels disappointed and tricked. Perhaps the principal was interested in being open to new ideas at first, and then found that she was between a rock and a hard-place and couldn't accept some of the recommendations of this group. Principals have difficulty with the practicalities of change. Much is mandated and sometimes because of other issues such as contract language is not within the realm of a principal to easily or quickly change.

•The disappointment is clear. Sounds as if Malkin was trying to do everything right and that the change hasn't happened. Parents need to ensure that any motions passed at parent meetings are recorded so they can be addressed in some way. Issues need to be sorted out as to where they need to be addressed, by the school, the Ministry, the school district or the electorate, etc.

•The parent and the administrator need to talk! The outcome of this should be some sort of process regarding parent initiatives. Honest help is seldom a

threat. Somehow Malkin needs to continue to work with the folks responsible for making decisions happen.

Ambushed by "the system"

The last narrative is not a parent narrative. It comes from a university professor who was discussing my research findings in relation to her own experiences at a university committee meeting where there were other faculty members present. She discovered that even parents who had some experience and understanding as "teachers" still found themselves feeling helpless as "parents". She wrote to me:

> **"I was on a Masters 'defense' committee recently. All of us faculty at the defense had been or were teachers. All except me had been 'Chairs' of parent councils. All four faculty members showed "the teacher's" perspective in their research—and yet, within fifteen minutes, all of the others began to tell stories as 'parents'. All their stories dealt with feeling mistreated, unheard, marginalized, having no voice, and, above all, fearful to do anything in case it reverberated onto their child. These are people who are powerful, understand the system, and have been or are a part of it now.**
>
> **What must it be like for parents without these resources? I think when such people finally get a platform, years of anxiety, fear and anger come bubbling out—and they aren't very much concerned with being fair."** (Lee)

The Principals Respond to Lee:

- ***These kind of problems must happen, given the background of the people reporting this to you, but it is surprising to me. The principal needs to follow up on how people are feeling regarding the parent council and needs to speak to parents regarding any issues raised. How did they feel it was handled? What was the outcome? This should be a standard procedure.***

- ***People who wannabe principals or wannabe Parent Council members have to start working on relationships. When positive relationships are established then anything can be dealt with. When negative relationships exist, nothing is going to work. Perhaps they need help building the good relationships before they touch the business end of things.***

• *In looking at my responses to your parents I see that it appears I am blatantly supporting the principals you have written about. But I believe it "'is" the principal's job to work well with these parents and with all parents. I have personally had nothing but positive experiences with my parent councils even in difficult situations and through difficult times. I think the key to productive parent and school councils is the same as for teachers in the classroom. It all rests on good relationships.*

• *Many principals have grown up with the old system and have difficulty with the power issues involved with parents. Hot Dogs are much easier! Sounds like there is a real need for understanding and trust by all the people involved.*

• *A major concern is that somehow the work done at parent councils or by PAC parents could "reverberate" back to the child.*

• *I think that what she said is "right on".*

• *I'd like to think that principals have a positive rapport with most parents. For those folks not comfortable with talking with the principal, we need to put forth more efforts and greater compassion. Sometimes there needs to be forgiveness . If there are more positive experiences with school administrators perhaps old wounds will heal and be forgotten. There will likely be some parents who are so badly scarred that they'll carry anger to their graves. Those are our failures.*

Principals and "true dialogue"

The parents who have just shared their stories still do not feel that they or their school or parent councils are contributing to the life and work of their school in a meaningful way. Some describe their parent council meetings as "stage managed" and their own concerns and voices as "silenced". Others suggest that discussion about hot dogs continues to be the order of the day. These parents want to be much more than hot dog helpers.

Those who have had some involvement beyond hot dogs and bake sales speak of decisions already being made "before" information is shared, or of their involvement with committee work eventually being dropped due to lack of support from the school administrator. There appears to be a "polite fiction" in place (Clift, Veal, Holland, Johnson & McCarthy, 1995) where the parents are treated as "parlour-guests" and are kept away from the real world of the school. Without legislated or mandated decision-making authority parents must rely on the good will or the invitation of the school principal to determine their role.

However most teachers and parents and students of today will no longer give principals total discretion about how to run their schools. In fact they will sabotage the efforts of any principal who they believe is unfair or uninterested in their ideas (Comer, 1980). Even personable and capable principals cannot dictate school policy as their predecessors once did. Education programs from the past which concentrated on administrative procedures and fiscal management are no longer enough. Perhaps faculties of education need to consider courses which teach practical consenual leadership strategies rather than the more commonly offered theoretical models of leadership (Collins, 1996).

Principals are needed who will take seriously as well as give "voice" to the different visions of reality expressed by parents, and by students, in the everyday life of the school. Indeed, the "most powerful meaning of democracy is formed not in glossy political rhetoric, but in the details of everyday lives" (Apple & Beane, 1995).

Principals who view the involvement of parents as "intrusive" need to review the wealth of information and research which strongly indicates how schools improve when all school partners are united in purpose and effort (Schmoker, 1996). Don Moore, whose advocacy organization Designs for Change, spearheaded the Chicago school reform movement, reflects this fear of "turning power over". He states " Lots of people told us we were making a terrific mistake because we were turning power over to illiterate, underclass people, taking it away from those who had professional knowledge" (Osborne & Gaebler, 1993, p. 54). Yet a year after the reforms began, 81 percent of

parents and 62 percent of teachers indicated that their schools were operating " better" than before. The councils were described as a new democratic unit in the community. Interest in the council elections was strongly evident through the 17,000 people who put their names forward during the first election.

The principals who responded to the parent narratives in this paper spoke from a variety of years of experience and from very different school settings. Many focused on the importance of respecting and working with parents and the need for good relationships to be built.

Such relationships begin with people meeting and talking and dialoguing together. Freire (1970/ 1997) insists that true dialogue between groups and individuals cannot exist without humility. "Dialogue as the encounter of those addressed to the common task of learning and acting, is broken if the parties (or one of them) lack humility." "How can I dialogue if I consider myself a member of the in-group of 'pure' men, the owners of truth and knowledge, for whom all non-members are 'these people' or 'the great unwashed'?" (p. 71).

We need administrators who are ready to enter into this "true dialogue". Administrators would not be closed to or offended by the contribution of others and would be willing to listen "in humility". At a time when principals' workdays are characterized simultaneously by variety, fragmentation and constant interruptions (Fullan, 1991), principals demonstrate a tendency to engage themselves in the most current, pressing situation. The high level of interest among parents to play a more meaningful role at school indicates that this "is" indeed a current, pressing problem. Principals need exemplary yet practical models of how to collaborate and share power. The education system needs principals willing to take on the complex ambiguous role that this sharing of power and working towards collaborative decisions demands.

References

Angus, L. (1993). Democratic participation or efficient site management: The social and political location of the self-managing school. In Smyth, J. (Ed.) A socially critical view of the self-managing school. (p. 11-33). Washington, D.C.: Falmer Press

Apple, M. & Beane, J. (1995). Lessons from democratic schools. In Apple, M. & Beane, J. (Eds.), Democratic schools Alexandria, VA : ASCD

Clift, R. ; Veal, M. ; Holland, P. ; Johnson, M., & McCarthy, J. (1995). Collaborative leadership and shared decision making. New York: Teachers College Press.

Collins, A. (1995). Exemplary models of parental and community involvement: Ten Newfoundland and Labrador schools. (Human Resource Development Project HRD -E- 93-136). Memorial University of Newfoundland.

Collins, A. (1996) . School councils and principals: Issues and challenges. The Canadian School Executive. 16 (4) , 3-6.

Comer, J. (1980). School power. New York: The Free Press

Epstein, J. (1991) . Paths to partnership: What we can learn from federal, state, district, and school initiatives. Phi Delta Kappan. 72 (5) , 346-354.

Epstein, J., & Lee, S. (1995). National patterns of school and family connections in the middle grades. In Ryan, Adams, Gullotta, Weissber, & Hampton (Eds.), The family-school connection: Theory, research and practice. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications

Flinspach, S. & Ryan, S. (1994). Diversity of outcomes: Local schools under school reform. Education and urban society. 26 (3). 292-305.

Fullan, M. (1991) . The new meaning of educational change. New York: Teachers College Press

Fullan, M. (1982) . The meaning of educational change. Toronto: OISE Press.

Freire, P. (1970/1997). Pedagogy of the oppressed. New York: Continuum.

Golanda, E. (1990, November). The importance of the source of power in an educational setting. Paper presented at the Southern Regional Council on Educational Administration Conference, Atlanta, GA.

Greenfield, T. & Ribbins, P. (1993) . Greenfield on educational administration: Towards a humane science. New York: Routledge.

Greenwood, G., & Hickman, C. (1991). Research and Practice in Parent Involvement: Implications for Teacher Education. The Elementary School Journal, 91, (3).

Guppy, N. & Davies, S. (1997, July). Understanding the Declining Confidence of Canadians' in Public Education. Paper presented at the American Sociological Association Meeting, Toronto, Ontario, Canada.

Hoyle, J. (1994). Can a principal run the show and be a democratic leader? NAASP Bulletin. 78 (558) 33-39

Henderson, A. (1987). The evidence continues to grow. National Committee for Citizens in Education. Columbia, Maryland

Hyde, D. (1992) . School-parent collaboration results in academic achievement. NAASP Bulletin. 76 (543).

Lewington, J. , & Orpwood, G. (1995) . Overdue assignment. Toronto: John Wiley & Sons.

Lincoln, Y. (1990). The making of a constructivist: A remembrance of transformations past. In Guba, E. (Ed.), The paradigm dialog. California: Sage Publications

Martin, Y. M. (1993). Parental participation policy for schools: A comparative legislative analysis of reform and dynamic conservatism in British Columbia, Alberta and Quebec. In Y. M. Martin & R. J. S. Macpherson (Eds.) Restructuring administrative policy in public schooling. Calgary, Canada: Detselig Enterprises.

Nathan, J. (1983/1991) . Free to teach: Achieving equity and excellence in schools. New York: The Pilgrim Press.

Osborne, D. & Gaebler, T. (1993). Reinventing government: How the entrepreneurial spirit is transforming the public sector. New York: Penguin Books.

Ontario Parent Council (1994). Report on the establishment of school parent councils in Ontario. Toronto, ONT : Ontario Ministry of Education

Province of British Columbia. (1993). Public school act: c-22. Victoria, B.C.: Ministry of Education

Renihan, F. & Renihan, P. (1994). Encouraging Meaningful Parent Involvement. The School Trustee February 16-21

Rideout, D. (1995) . School councils in Canada. Education Canada. 35 (2), 12-18.

Riley, A. (1994, Fall/Autumn) . Parent empowerment: An idea for the nineties? Education Canada. 14-20.

Schmoker, M. (1996). Results: The key to continuous school improvement. Alexandria, VA: ASCD

Smylie, M., Crowson, R. , Chou, V. & Levin, R. (1994) . The principal and community-school connections in Chicago's radical reform. Educational Administration Quarterly . 30 (3), 342-364 .

Weatherley, R. & Lipsky, M. (1977). Street-level bureaucrats and institutional innovation: Implementing special-education reform. Harvard educational review. 47 (2). 171-197.